

# Polybius on Rome v. Greece

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*When the Greek historian, Polybius, decided to write a history of Rome's conquest of Greece in the second century B.C., events in which he had been heavily involved, he set himself very high standards of impartiality, accuracy, and analysis, but did he live up to his own ideals?*

What is difficult about writing history is not writing about the distant past. It is a positive advantage that we know so little and that no one cares desperately what you say. The difficult thing is writing recent history, and particularly writing about events that people think they still remember. If all you do is tell people what they remember, they will hardly find that interesting. But if you make claims they don't recognise, they are not keen to believe them.

What could be harder, then, than writing about a war that you had a part in but where you ended up on the losing side? Those you fought with will have their own views on what went wrong, and they are not likely to be very receptive to your different views. 'Well, you would say that, wouldn't you?', they'll say. And in any case, they might continue, 'It's a bit late now to learn the lessons'. Those you fought against aren't terribly interested in how they won, and why should they take note of what someone they defeated says? They say that history is always written by the winners, and it isn't hard to see why.

## History written by the losers

It is pretty remarkable, then, that Polybius ever even started to write a history of the Roman conquest of Greece. Born around 200 B.C., Polybius grew up at the heart of the conflict between the Greek states and Rome. His father was a leading figure in the Achaean league, an alliance of cities in central Greece which was one of the major players in the conflict with Rome. Polybius himself was an Achaean ambassador to Egypt when he was barely 20 years old. When the Romans conclusively defeated the Greek states in 167, Polybius' name was on the Romans' 'most-wanted' list, and he ended up as one of a thousand Greeks taken to Rome as hostages and kept there for the next seventeen years. So when Polybius, while in Rome, wrote up his account in Greek of the Roman conquest, everyone, whether Greek or Roman, knew where he was coming from. Could he tell either Greeks or Romans anything different enough to be interesting, credible enough to be true, and dispassionate enough for them not to reckon he was only writing to whitewash himself and his friends?

## How to write history – my way

Polybius starts defiantly. If you aren't interested, that's your fault, not mine. History, he writes, deserves its reputation as the great education, and his particular chunk of history is unmissable:

*Is there anyone so lazy or ignorant that he does not want to know how almost the whole inhabited world fell under the rule of one power, the power of Rome, in just fifty-three years?*

His history is going to sort all this out clearly and systematically. A succession of thrilling anecdotes doesn't constitute history; the historian's job is to tell 'what was actually said and done,

however commonplace it may be'.

But defiance isn't all. Polybius also makes a pre-emptive strike and defends himself against his critics from the outset. Won't a man like him be too prejudiced to write history? No, he says, there are indeed many circumstances in which patriotism is appropriate and in which personal likes and dislikes should be expressed, but not in the writing of history. 'If you take truth from history, what is left is but an idle and unprofitable tale'. He is not going to shrink from praising enemies and blaming friends. Nor is he going to have heroes and villains: he will judge them always by their actions:

*for it is impossible that men engaged in public affairs should always be right, and unlikely that they should always be wrong.*

## History and the pity of history

All very proper, we might think, but won't this just be deadly boring, a succession of dead facts, tediously recorded just because they happened? Not at all. Polybius promises to get behind the events and tell us why they happened like this.

*The simple report of what happened may amuse but it is without use. History only becomes fruitful when you consider causation.*

Considering causation means not just identifying what started it, but identifying motivations. And identifying motivations matters because

*without knowing the cause it is impossible to feel due indignation or pity at anything which occurs.*

Indignation and pity? Wasn't this the man who disowned personal likes and dislikes? How can Polybius both criticize other historians for being eager to stir the hearts of their readers to pity and then promote his own history as good because it produces pity? The important thing for Polybius is not whether or not a history stirs up emotions, but whether those emotions are stirred up by a true understanding of the situation.

## Do as I say, not as I write

It is pretty hard to take exception to Polybius' aspirations. His historical self-consciousness and the range of factors which he insists that a historian needs to control – including basic facts about population and resources – mark him out even among the great Greek and Roman historians. But how does his own historical practice fare against these ideals? Polybius was himself in the thick of the history which he is describing. He interacted with the figures he describes not from afar but intimately. Can he really distance himself so far that he can convince us that it is indeed truth alone which guides his account?

Much of the charm of Polybius comes from the way in which the historian's noble aspirations and historical ideals rub up against the politician's experiences and prejudice. So Polybius makes a lot of his points about what historians should do by attacking the way another historian treated an episode in the history of ... Megalopolis – Polybius' own native city. 'Of the noble conduct of the people of Megalopolis he has not said a word...'. But when he himself comes to writing about the most

important figure in the history of Megalopolis, a man named Philopoemen, Polybius insists that his history will be ‘absolutely equal-handed in praise and blame’, then goes on to paint a portrait which contains no adverse judgements...

Even Polybius’ good sense often comes to seem self-serving. He has a discussion of treachery that is in itself thoroughly sensible – to make an agreement with some other political power isn’t treachery if it is peacetime, but nor is it necessarily treacherous in time of war, since it might be in the best interests of one’s country. But Polybius inserts this discussion into his history when he has just told of the crucial turning point in the history of the Achaean League, when the League voted to overturn their alliance with Macedon and ally instead with Rome. The vote was very contentious, procedurally as well as in its substance, but the effect of Polybius’ digression just happens to be to acquit the man who forced the vote through from the charge of being a traitor.

Still more blatantly, when Polybius discusses the Macedonian king, Philip V, he condemns those who *fail* to criticize him. And though he elsewhere objects to historians who put into speakers’ mouths what they *ought* to have said, rather than what they *did* say, Polybius himself tells us the content of Philip’s dreams.

Polybius’ partiality is not restricted to individuals. He is repeatedly scathing about the Aetolian League, the major rivals to the Achaean League. He alleges extravagance, treachery, that they never did anything without a bribe, and that all their actions were motivated by short-sighted considerations of self-interest. He even claims that they misinterpret Roman actions because they assume the Romans are as lacking in honesty as they themselves and Greeks in general:

*those who handle public affairs among the Greeks, if entrusted with just one talent of money, though there are ten accountants and as many seals and twice the number of witnesses, nevertheless are unable to keep faith; but among the Romans those handling a great amount of money as magistrates or ambassadors do their duty on the basis simply of having sworn an oath.*

One might be forgiven for wondering whether this hostage in Rome isn’t buttering up his hosts.

### **A very human historian**

Ironically, however, in the end, the reader comes to trust Polybius *because* of the way his practice contradicts his theory rather than despite that contradiction. To read Polybius’ text is to come to know a man who is absolutely clear about what he ought to do, and absolutely incapable of seeing that he is not doing it. What he sees to be prejudice and undue drama in other historians, he takes to be truth when he does the same himself. Polybius was right to think that his subject matter was gripping, but equally gripping is the sight of an intelligent man, caught up in the events he describes, trying, and failing, to extricate himself from the intense loyalties and animosities which those events generated. So, Polybius remains worth reading not only by those of us ashamed of being thought too lazy and ignorant to care how Rome conquered practically the whole inhabited world, but also by anyone who is thinking of writing any sort of history. For in him we see a mirror of our own foibles.

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